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ABSTRACT

The fourth, and final, annual statewide public opinion polling is part of a multifaceted evaluation of Arizona's school to work (STW) initiative. Baseline data were established in spring 1996; comparative data have been collected annually since then. The polling assesses public attitudes toward STW, and determines their level of support or opposition to the initiative. Each year, three constituent groups were polled: parents, businesses, and educators. Sample sizes in 1999 yielded results comparable with those in 1996, 1997, and 1998 results. Findings indicate the following: public awareness of STW has grown significantly during the past 4 years; awareness of involvement in a regional partnership has grown; most Arizonans are satisfied with the overall quality of public schools, but are least satisfied with those aspects of education that relate more closely to STW, and are in favor of changes in public schools that support STW outcomes; and many Arizonans are skeptical that STW "can work." Clear majorities of Arizonans support STW on every indicator of support measured, including the following: willingness to pay taxes to support STW; willingness to vote for pro-STW elected officials; identification of STW participation as "very important" in the lives of students; indication that one would change schools to allow a child to participate in STW; and support to include STW in the state's budget. (YLB)

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Arizona's School To Work Initiative: Four-Year Trends in Public Opinion

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #17 *June 1999*

by Judith A. Vandegrift, Morrison Institute for Public Policy
and Joel Wright, Wright Consulting Services

ED 438 401

In 1995, Arizona received a five-year grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education under the auspices of the *School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994*. The intent of the Act was to provide "venture capital" for states to create statewide systems of school-to-work (STW) opportunities for students. During the five-year funding cycle (pending annual reapplications), federal dollars to each state decrease proportionately after year two. And, beyond the sunset of the Act in the year 2001, states are expected to sustain — *on their own* — whatever systems they have established.

Arizona's system is administered and coordinated by the Arizona Department of Commerce, School To Work Division. It consists of county-based partnerships (sidebar) which serve all of Arizona. For fiscal year 1998-99, ten regional STW partnerships are serving the Navajo Nation and all counties outside of Maricopa County, while the latter is served by eight partnerships affiliated with the state's economic development clusters as defined by the Governor's Strategic Partnership for Economic Development (or, GSPED). Each partnership works in its own region to link schools with businesses for the purpose of implementing programs to help students identify and explore career options and experience the "world of work."

Arizona is preparing to enter its fifth and final year of federal funding. The state — like many others — is finding itself in a position to reflect upon its performance over the past four years and determine both *what* to sustain and *how* to sustain it. Of course, sustaining any initiative is worthwhile only if people perceive it as valuable.

As ***one measure*** of the state's overall efforts to assess its progress and determine Arizonans' perceptions of STW, the School To Work Division has commissioned an annual statewide public opinion poll. The purpose of the polling is to assess public attitudes toward STW and determine their level of support for — or opposition to — the initiative.

Arizona's STW Partnerships (1998-99)

Regional Partnerships

- Cochise STW Partnership
- Coconino County STW Partnership
- Eastern Arizona STW Partnership
- Mohave Workforce Development Partnership
- Northeastern Arizona Native American STW Partnership
- Northland STW Opportunities System
- Pima & Santa Cruz Counties STW Partnership
- Pinal County STW Partnership
- Yavapai County STW Partnership
- Yuma/La Paz STW Partnership

Maricopa County Partnerships

- Agri-nomics Partnership
- Arizona Public Service STW Partnership
- Arts & Humanities STW Partnership
- Bioindustry STW Partnership
- High Technology Industry Cluster STW Partnership
- Maricopa County Tourism and Experience Partnership
- Software Cluster STW Partnership
- Water Resources Mentor Program

This briefing paper highlights findings from the state's fourth, and final, year of assessing public opinion toward STW. Unless otherwise noted, the paper summarizes changes between baseline data (1996) and the current polling (1999).

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Overview of the Polling

The polling is part of a multifaceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative coordinated by Morrison Institute for Public Policy. In collaboration with Morrison Institute, the polling is conducted by the independent firm of Wright Consulting Services. Baseline data were established in the spring of 1996. Comparative data have been collected annually.

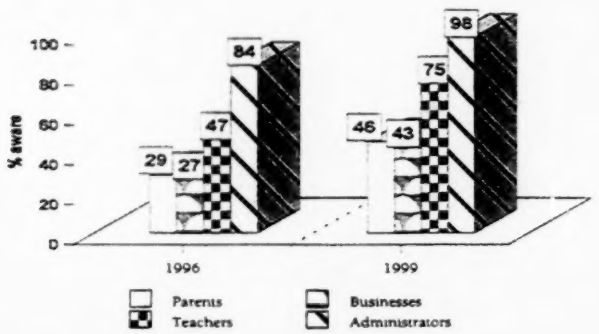
Each year, three constituent groups are polled: parents, businesses, and educators. Samples from each constituent group are randomly selected annually. Groups are stratified by county and, to the extent possible, by STW partnership. Businesses also are stratified by size (i.e., number of employees) and educators are stratified by role (i.e., teacher, principal, and superintendent) and type of school (i.e., elementary, junior/middle, high school).

Similar to past years, a total of 2,200 Arizonans participated in the 1999 polling. Respondents represent 600 parents, 600 businesses, and 1,000 educators including 500 teachers and 500 administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents). All sample sizes yield results that are comparable with the 1996, 1997, and 1998 results and are statistically accurate within a 95% level of confidence (with margins of error not exceeding ± 4.5 percentage points).

Public Awareness of the STW Initiative

Respondents' awareness of the STW initiative is measured by asking them if they have heard of STW. Figure 1 shows that since the baseline year, overall awareness of STW has risen across all groups. All changes are statistically significant. ***In short, significantly more parents, businesses, teachers, principals, and superintendents are aware of School To Work than when the initiative was first funded.***

Figure 1
Arizonans' awareness of the STW initiative



Furthermore, respondents are asked: "To the best of your knowledge, are the public schools *in your area* involved in the STW initiative or not?" ***Table 1 shows that significantly more parents, business people, teachers, and administrators in 1999 report local school involvement than in the baseline year.***

Table 1
Arizonans' awareness of involvement in a regional partnership

% awareness of regional involvement

	1996	1999	% change
Parents	14%	27%	↑ 13%
Businesses	11%	16%	↑ 5%
Teachers	20%	47%	↑ 27%
Administrators	60%	83%	↑ 23%

Quality of Education and the Perceived Need for School Change

Each year, respondents are asked to rate the *overall* quality of public school education. Table 2 shows trend data which illustrate that two groups — parents and administrators — rate the overall quality of education significantly higher in 1999 than in 1996, while one group (teachers) shows no change, and businesses rate the quality of education lower than in the past.

Table 2
Arizonans' ratings of the overall quality of public school education

% rating education as "excellent" or "good"

	1996	1999	% change
Parents	43%	54%	↑11%
Businesses	46%	37%	↓ 9%
Teachers	66%	67%	↑ 1%
Administrators	79%	85%	↑ 6%

Respondents also are asked to rate the quality of education in terms of **nine specific aspects of education**:

— three that pertain to "academic" outcomes (providing basic education; teaching other

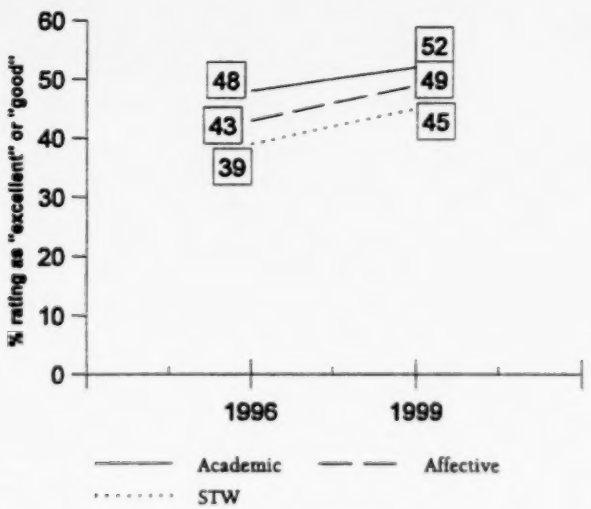
subjects such as art, music, and so on; preparing students for higher education),

— three that describe the affective environment of schools (providing a positive learning environment; motivating students; helping students deal with personal problems) and

— three that are associated with to school-to-work types of programs/activities (preparing students to be successful in society; tailoring learning experiences to match community needs; teaching students skills they will need in the "world of work").

Notably, greater percentages of respondents rate the quality of all nine aspects of education higher in 1999 than in 1996. In rank order, however, "academic" education is perceived most positively, followed by the affective environment that schools provide and school-to-work types of activities. Trend data are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Arizonans' ratings of specific aspects of public school education



Despite favorable ratings for the quality of education, and many specific aspects of education, most respondents continue to voice the opinion that schools need to change how they operate. Between 1996 and 1998, more than 90% of all groups said that *some* degree of change is necessary. In 1999, more than 95% of each group said that change is necessary. ***These data illustrate that support for change has been consistently high throughout the four years of polling.***

Asked what kind of changes are needed— specifically in terms of "back-to-basics" or more comprehensive education including skills such as computer and work skills—***roughly 90% of all respondents consistently prefer a more comprehensive approach to education.*** Such a comprehensive approach includes the kinds of changes noted in the box below.

What kinds of changes are needed in Arizona's schools?

More than 75% of Arizona parents, businesses, teachers and administrators agree that the following changes would be beneficial:

Teachers' duties — to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits, and other work-related concerns;

Programs/curriculum design — toward greater collaboration with business and community leaders and parents;

Work-based learning — integrating more work-based learning into the schools to better prepare students for work after leaving the system;

Courses of study — toward offering "Career Majors" for students; and,

Student employment opportunities — creating more opportunities for students while they are still in school.

Specific Attitudes Toward STW

Probing further into specific attitudes about STW, people are asked to react to pairs of statements about STW in terms of three major ideas: (1) whether it will or won't "work" because of the nature of the education bureaucracy; (2) whether STW provides broad or narrow career exploration and preparation opportunities; and (3) whether it is or is *not* for all students, including the college-bound. ***Results for all four years reveal that, in general, a majority of people agree with positive statements and disagree with negative ones.***

Nevertheless, a comparison of 1996 (baseline) and 1999 data reveals some disturbing trends.

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- Significantly fewer members of *every* constituent group express optimism that STW will work because it allows everyone to have a "voice" in change, i.e., bureaucrats won't be "calling all the shots."

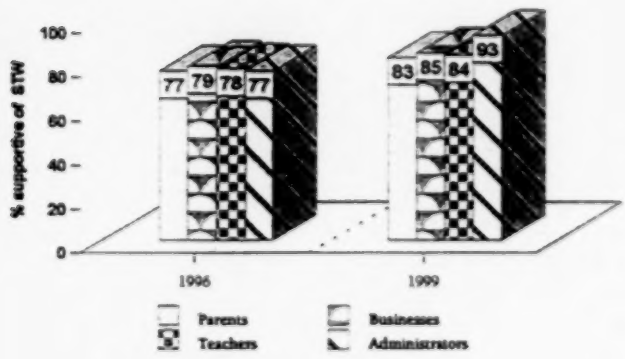
- Significantly fewer members of *every* constituent group view STW as providing broad career preparation, i.e., providing training for *all* types of jobs.

- Significantly fewer parents and businesses view STW as appropriate for ***all*** students, including the college-bound.

Support for the STW Initiative

Each year, constituent groups are asked whether—overall—they support or oppose the STW initiative. Support among all constituent groups has risen steadily over time. As illustrated in Figure 3, administrators' support has risen the most dramatically by 16 points (from 77% in 1996 to 93% in 1999). ***In sum, significantly more parents, businesses, teachers, principals, and superintendents support School To Work today than when the initiative was first funded.***

Figure 3
Arizonans' support for the STW initiative



In terms of personally showing support for STW, respondents are asked each year whether they would be willing to pay additional taxes ($50 per year) to fund STW programs and whether they would vote for or against political candidates running for office who are supportive of STW. For the fourth consecutive year,

> ***clear majorities (greater than or equal to 55%) of all four constituent groups indicate a willingness to pay up to $50 a year to help fund STW programs.***

Furthermore, since STW began in 1996, "voter support" has risen modestly among parents and significantly among businesses, teachers, and administrators. In 1999,

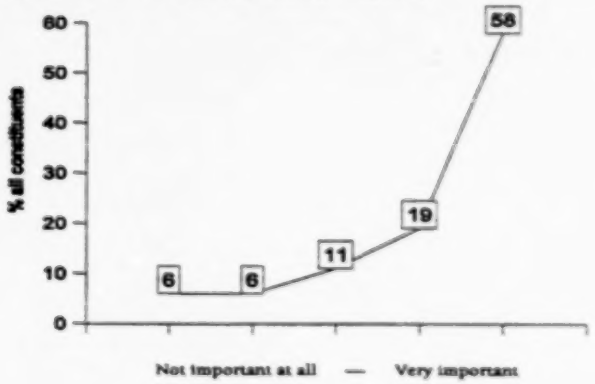
> ***between 53% and 63% of those polled say they would vote for a candidate for elective office who is a strong supporter of STW.***

Because Arizona is preparing to enter its final year of federal funding for STW, three questions related to public support for STW were included in this final poll that have not been asked previously. Results for each question are summarized separately.

How important is it that students have the opportunity to participate in a STW program?

All constituents were asked how important it is for students to have the opportunity to participate in career preparation studies like those involved in STW programs. Figure 4 shows that nearly six out of every ten (58%) people polled view participation in career preparation as *very* important.

Figure 4
Importance of STW participation (n = 2,200)

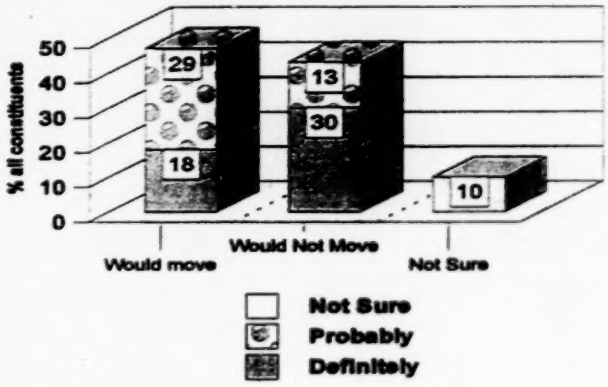


What is the likelihood that you would move a student from a non-STW school to a STW school?

All constituents were asked whether they felt strongly enough about STW such that they would move their child from a non-STW school to a STW school. Figure 5 shows that ***47% of all those polled indicated that they would definitely (18%) or probably (29%) move their child from a non-STW school to a STW school*** if career preparation opportunities were not available in their local school. This compares with 43% of those who said they would definitely (30%) or probably (13%) *not* move. Ten

percent of those polled were not sure whether they would move a student to a STW school.

Figure 5
Likelihood of changing schools for STW (n = 2,200)



Should funding for Arizona's STW initiative be incorporated into the state budget, or should the initiative end once federal funding ceases?

Finally, those polled were informed that the state's STW initiative is scheduled to end in the year 2000 with the sunset of federal funding. Constituents were asked to indicate whether they felt STW activities should be incorporated into the state budget or simply end. Results are shown in Table 3 and illustrate that of all those polled, an average ***75% are in favor of incorporating funding to support STW activities within the state budget*** (although percentages of support range from 69%-79% as shown in Table 3).

Table 3
Arizonans' attitudes toward continuing STW

	What should happen to STW?		
	Incorporate into budget	Let it end	Not sure
Parents	72%	12%	16%
Businesses	80%	7%	13%
Teachers	69%	13%	18%
Administrators	79%	12%	9%
TOTALS	**75%**	**11%**	**14%**

Conclusions

What story do four years of polling data tell about STW?

- **Public awareness of STW has grown significantly during the past four years.**

  Nearly twice as many parents and businesses have heard about STW now compared to 1996. Fully three-quarters of all teachers polled have heard about STW compared with less than half at the beginning of the initiative, and nearly all (98%) of school principals and superintendents know something about STW. To the extent that increased awareness reflects state and regional/local marketing efforts to "spread the word" about STW, these efforts have been successful.

- **Awareness of involvement in a regional partnership has grown.**

  Significantly more parents, businesses, and educators report being aware of their involvement in a regional STW partnership than at the beginning of the initiative. Based on percentages of awareness, educators' awareness of involvement exceeds that of parents and businesses. To the extent that increased awareness of involvement in a regional STW partnership reflects regional/local efforts to recruit school and business partners, these efforts have been successful — particularly with respect to school personnel.

- **Most Arizonans are satisfied with the overall quality of public schools — however, they are least satisfied with those aspects of education which relate more closely to STW and are in favor of changes in public schools that support STW outcomes.**

  Most Arizonans, except for those representing business, appear satisfied with the overall quality of public education. Over half of all parents, teachers, and school administrators polled in 1999 rate the overall quality of public education in Arizona as either "excellent" or "good." Nevertheless, when it comes to aspects of education that relate specifically to preparing young people to be successful in their communities, society, and the "world or work," schools are rated less positively compared to other types of programming.

In relation to this finding, nearly all (95% or more) of *all* constituent groups feel that *some* degree of change is needed in Arizona public schools. Furthermore, a vast majority support the kinds of changes that STW promotes in terms of changing teachers' duties and enhancing the curriculum to make learning more applied and relevant.

- **Many Arizonans are skeptical that STW "can work."**

While a vast majority of Arizonans appear to be in favor of the kinds of changes that STW promotes, there is also a trend over time of increasing skepticism that change will, in fact, occur. Education is viewed by many as an entrenched bureaucracy that simply does not change. And, while STW is perceived as valuable, it is *not* viewed as a mechanism to achieve school reform (which was one of the congressional intents of the STW Act of 1994). Rather, it has become increasingly perceived as a more narrowly-focused career preparation program that is not suitable for all children.

- **Clear majorities of Arizonans support STW on every indicator of support measured including:**

  - **willingness to pay taxes to support STW;**
  - **willingness to vote for pro-STW elected officials;**
  - **identification of STW participation as "very important" in the lives of students;**
  - **indication that one would change schools to allow a child to participate in STW; and**
  - **support to include STW in the state's budget.**

Over four years, asked in multiple ways, and given plenty of latitude to express dissenting views, a vast majority of Arizonans polled view STW as valuable and support the initiative in multiple ways. Many would pay taxes to support the initiative; many say that they would be more likely to vote for "pro-STW" candidates for elected office. Given these data, it appears that STW-supportive candidates are likely to receive a broader base of voter support than those who are not supportive of STW.

Over three-quarters of all those polled in 1999 (77%) say that student participation in a STW program is either very important (58%) or important (19%). And, nearly half of all those polled (47%) indicate that they would "definitely" or "probably" move a child from a non-STW school to a STW school. Of these, ***nearly four out of every ten parents (39%) indicated that they would definitely or probably move their child from a non-STW school to a STW school if presented with this choice.***

Of all those polled in 1999, an average of 75% would like to see STW programs and activities incorporated within the state's budget. They do *not* want to let STW end with the sunset of federal funding.

In sum, people know about STW. Many public schools and businesses are involved in implementing STW programs and activities. A majority of people like the changes in public school education for which STW stands. They support the initiative. They believe student STW participation is important and beneficial. They would like to see STW programs and activities institutionalized through funding. Of course, while public opinion matters, other measures of system and student performance (e.g., improved academic achievement by virtue of STW participation) are needed to "make the case" for STW.

Nevertheless, if STW were a ballot issue, polling data *alone* would suggest that the initiative would be a clear winner. STW *does* have some "image" problems. Perhaps not enough people know about the career awareness, exploration, and preparation opportunities that STW programs afford. Perhaps not enough businesses and parents have been involved to the extent that they can sway their local communities and schools to adopt STW independent of state funding. Perhaps Arizonans have a right to be skeptical, having witnessed the rise and fall of numerous well-intentioned educational initiatives.

School To Work has made great strides in Arizona. It is also running out of federally-funded time. Rather than view this as the end of an era, STW practitioners and supporters should view this as the opportunity to put STW to the test and make it a legislative issue. Let public opinion speak for itself.

Arizona's SCHOOLTOWORK SYSTEM

For additional information about
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School To Work is a division of the Arizona Department of Commerce, Office of Workforce Development Policy.
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